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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet answers questions parents might have on various topics connected with the education of their children. The parent's right to visit schools and talk to teachers is discussed. The responsibilities of school councils, including Local School Councils and District Education Councils, are outlined. The procedure for appointing school principals is described. Title I programs are explained. The right to bilingual education is discussed. Parents' right of access to student records is explained. The procedures for suspension and expulsion are outlined. The question of placement in special education classes is examined as is the right of the parent to challenge this decision. (MC)

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GUIDELINES FOR PARENT PARTICIPATION

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT PARENT RIGHTS IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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VISITING SCHOOLS, VISITING AND TALKING TO TEACHERS

The schools are public institutions, parents and other interested citizens are encouraged to visit. Before visiting though, call the school and let them know what day you are coming and which classes you want to observe. When you arrive at the school, stop at the office to let them know you are there and to sign in. You may be asked to stay out of certain classrooms because tests or some other activity is in progress. If these are the room you want to visit, you do have a right to come back on another day.

You also have the right to talk with your child's teachers. Most schools' discourage teachers and parents from holding conferences during school hours, however teachers have time before school begins to talk with parents and most teachers have at least three free periods a week during which time they can meet with you. If these times are not convenient for you, call or write your child's teacher to arrange a meeting at a more convenient time.

SCHOOL COUNCILS

Local School Councils

Chicago's parent advisory council system was developed in 1970 when the Board and superintendent decided that each school must have a Local School Council (LSC). Local School Councils are responsible for:

1) investigating the educational conditions, programs, and facilities in their school;
2) meeting with faculty and administration to discuss educational, disciplinary, or other programmatic concerns;
3) participating in the development of new

programs and the selection of textbooks, This can include the decision to develop a magnet school or to choose to cluster with other neighborhood schools;

4) holding general parent meetings on all matters of concern to the school community.

According to the Board's guidelines, the principal must make every effort to comply with properly passed LSC decisions; some decisions, of course , cannot be made at the local school level

Members of the LSC must be chosen by parents in the school, they cannot be chosen by the principal. At least 60% of the members of the council must be parents of children in the school; the other 40% may be neighbors, school staff, representatives from community organizations, high school students, etc. Only members of the Council are allowed to vote, and parents must be in a majority at any meeting where votes are taken.

Local School Councils meet monthly, their meetings are open to the public. Call your school to find out when the Council meets.

District Education Councils

Each school district also has a council. At least one member from each LSC serves on the District Council. 60% of the members on the District Council must be parents of students in the district; the other members may be interested neighbors, school staff and representatives from the community. Issues common to all schools in the district including budget concerns are discussed at the District Council meetings. District Councils must select the educational options to be offered at the district magnet schools.

District Councils meet monthly and the meetings are open to the public. Call your district office to learn when your District Council meets.

Principal Selection

The Illinois legislature recently amended the school code to allow community involvement in the selection of principals to fill existing vacancies. Community involvement in principal selection means that:

1) the LSC selects the members of the Principal Nominating Committee (PNC);
2) the PNC, in cooperation with the district superintendent and the LSC, decide on the criteria they will use in selecting a principal - the skills and experiences they believe a principal in their school needs;
3) after this list is developed, the district superintendent advises the Board of Education to advertise the principalship vacancy;
4) candidates who are interested in the position submit their resumes to the Board who screens these applications;
5) resumes of eligible candidates are turned over to the PNC for study, the committee must choose at least 6 candidates to interview for the job although they may interview more;
6) the PNC then nominates the candidates they consider most qualified for the position and that choice is submitted to the Board;
7) the final choice for principal is made by the Board of Education from the list of eligible candidates prepared by the PNC;
8) the entire process may take up to 5 months, if it should take any longer the Board will step in to fill the vacancy.

Title I (Federal Programs)

If your child attends a school in a high poverty area, it is likely that his/her school participates in the federal government's Title I program. The federal Title I program should not be confused with the state's Title I program, although both programs result in schools getting extra money, in Chicago, state Title I money is distributed among all public schools - where by law the federal Title I money goes only to schools serving students living in high poverty communities.

The federal Title I program allows schools with a greater than average percentage of children from low-income families to receive additional monies to be used for hiring extra teachers and/or buying more books and educational equipment. Chicago schools receiving these federal funds are in communities where at least 35% of the children come from low-income families. Once a school is eligible to receive money. the money must be used on students who are reading or doing math at a level at least 18 months below grade level, - family income is not used to determine how the money is distributed within the school. Of course, if Title I money is used on pre-school or kindergarten age children the 18 month requirement is waived.

By law, each Title I school must have a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) which is responsible for advising the school administration on the planning, development, operation and evaluation of their schools' Title I program. While the PAC is open to all parents in the school, the majority of members must be parents of children in the Title I programs, and this majority cannot include school employees. Again by law, PAC members must be selected by the parents; they cannot be chosen by the principal. To help the PAC make program

decisions, members of the Council must receive copies of Title I evaluations and have the opportunity to observe Title I programs in their own school and in other schools, they must also have the opportunity to meet with school personnel to discuss program possibilities.

There is also a city-wide PAC which has the responsibility for making basic decisions on how money will be allocated across the city and which grades and schools will be eligible for the funds. The meetings of this group are open to the public. Call the Title I department at the Board of Education, 641-4503, to find out when the city-wide PAC meets.

Bilingual Education

Both federal law and Illinois' Transitional Bilingual Education Act require that non-English speaking children be provided with an opportunity to receive instruction in their native language and to learn English. When a child in a bilingual program becomes proficient in English, he/she will then receive most of his/her instruction in English. Bilingual education tries to insure that non-English speaking children keep the ability to speak their native tongue and are educated in the culture and history of their ancestors. That is why the full name of these programs is bilingual/bicultural education.

According to Illinois law, any school having 20 or more children who speak the same native language and who have limited English speaking ability must offer these students a bilingual education program.

While a student may be placed in a bilingual program without parental consent, the school must notify the parent in writing that the child has

been placed in the program no later than 10 days after the transfer has been made. This notification must:

1) be in English and in the parent's native language;
2) advise the parents of their right to visit bilingual classes and to talk with the teachers;
3) inform the parents that they have the right to withdraw their child from the bilingual program by writing the principal and requesting that their child be returned to the regular program.

Unless the parent chooses to withdraw the child from the program, the student will remain in this program for three years or until he/she is fluent in English and can understand instruction given in that language, whichever shall occur first.

Each school participating in a bilingual program should have a Bilingual Parent Council. The Council must have at least 7 members, the majority of the members must be parents of children in the program. If a school has bilingual programs in several languages, each program should send one representative to the Council. This Council should participate in the planning, operation and evaluation of the program, the Council is also responsible for approving all program requests.

Districts with several bilingual programs have a district level Council. The city-wide bilingual Council meets approximately every 2 months and includes representatives from each district Council as well as representatives from community groups who may not be members of any Council. Call 641-7396 at the Board of Education to find out when the city-wide Council meets.

ACCESS TO STUDENT RECORDS

Under Federal and State law, as a parent of a student under 18 you have the right to:

1) examine your child's school records - no more than 15 school days may elapse between the time you make your request to study the records and the time when the school actually shows them to you (you may want to make your request in writing to make it easier to count the days);
2) get copies of your child's records - schools may charge up to 35¢ a page for photocopying the material, if you cannot pay this charge it will be waived;
3) challenge any information in the records that you consider unnecessary or misleading and request that it be changed or removed from your child's file - this request should be made by writing to the principal of the school, in your letter explain why you think the material should be changed or removed and ask for a hearing;
4) add any additional information to your child's file that you think might be important to his/her education.

With few exceptions, only parents, students and those school personnel with an academic interest in your child can be given information from his/her school record without your informed and written consent.

On his/her eighteenth birthday, or when your child graduates from high school, record rights 1-4 listed above become the students.

Our Project has published a pamphlet on school records rights with additional information on this topic.

SUSPENSION

A suspension is when the school orders your child to stay home for a period of time from 1-10 school days. Sometimes schools tell students to stay home until their parent comes back with them, while the school may not call that procedure a suspension it really is one and as in all suspensions the listed rights should be followed:

1) only the principal or his delegate who is usually the assistant principal can suspend students;
2) a student may not be suspended without a due process hearing, unless he present a hazard to the school;
3) at this hearing they must be told the specific school rule they are accused of breaking, and they must have the opportunity to tell their side of the story and to call in witnesses;
4) if your child asks for you to be present at this hearing, the hearing cannot occur unless you are there;
5) if, after the hearing, the school decides to suspend your child, you must receive a written explanation of the suspension and be told when your child can return to school - this is true even if the parent does not attend the hearing;
6) your child has the right to take his assignments home to keep up on classwork - if he/she was not given any assignments

before the suspension, you should call the school and arrange to pick up his/her work or have someone bring them home;

7) a suspension decision may be appealed. If you wish to appeal the school decision, ask for a meeting with your child's principal or the district superintendent, also ask for copies of the school rules so that you will know what students can be suspended for.

Each school in Chicago has different students conduct rules and not all schools have rules. It is very difficult for a principal to suspend students if the school has no written rules. If you think your child's suspension was unnecessary or unfair, appeal it. Also remember that LSC is supposed to have some voice in establishing school **rules, you** may wish to have suspension/discipline discussed at a Council meeting.

EXPULSION

A student is considered expelled from school whenever they are told that:

1) they can no longer attend their present school;
2) the school chooses to transfer them to another school without their consent;
3) they agree to a transfer to another public school but that school refuses to accept them.

Before a student can be expelled from school, the school must hold an expulsion hearing. The parent must be notified of this hearing by certified or registered mail and must be told that they have the right to:

1) be present at the hearing;
2) bring a friend, an advocate or an attorney who can participate in the hearing be calling in witnesses for the student and confronting and cross-examining the school's witnesses.

Of course, your child has the right to explain his/her side of the story at the hearing. The evidence is heard by a hearing officer (h.o.) a private attorney not employed by the school system. After hearing the case, the h.o. prepares a written summary of the testimony and makes his/her recommendation to the district superintendent. The district superintendent makes the final decision.

Remember, although most Chicago high schools' expel students without a hearing it is your legal right and your child's legal right to receive a formal hearing before your child's pushed out of school.

Our Project has published a pamphlet on suspension and expulsion rights with additional information on both of these topics.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Under federal and state laws, special education services must be made available to all children ages 3-21 or until graduation from high school. Special education students like all school age youngsters are entitled to receive a free and appropriate public education. Children needing these services include youngsters with hearing, vision or speech problems, children who have trouble learning, children with social or emotional problems and children who have physical or health problems. If you are the parent of a special education student

or a child needing special education services, you have the right to participate in all decisions made about your child's education - this includes the right to receive copies of all information the school has pertaining to the evaluation, placement and education of your child.

In Chicago, a parent who thinks his/her child needs special education services should go to the local school and fill out a request for a special education evaluation. If the school decides not to evaluate your child they will inform you, you may appeal this decision by requesting an impartial due process hearing. If the school agrees with your request, you should make sure that the evaluation team receive copies of doctor's reports, recommendations of other experts who have worked with your child, and any other information you consider helpful in making the placement decision.

In most cases however, it is the school and not the parent who initiates the special education evaluation process. If the school initiates the process, they must notify you in writing as to:

1) why they feel your child needs special education services;
2) when your child will be evaluated and what kind of tests will be given;
3) your right to object to the evaluation process and the procedures you follow in requesting an impartial due process hearing.

If you agree to allow the school to evaluate your child for special education services, you will be interviewed by the school social worker and asked questions about your family life, your child's health, his/her medical history and your

child's behavior outside of school. This information will become part of your child's file. Remember - you have the right to read, receive copies of and challenge all material in your child's file.

Your child's placement will be decided at a case study conference or staffing. This is a conference between the school personnel who have worked with your child (teachers, the school-nurse, social worker, adjustment teacher, psychologist and sometimes the principal) and you, the parent, to decide on the most appropriate special education placement or service for your child. It is very important that you attend this meeting and that you clearly state the kinds of service you feel your child should receive. You also have the right to be accompanied by a friend, an advocate, a psychologist, an attorney or whoever you think can help you and the school develop an appropriate program for your child. If the school says that they do not have the program or service you think your child needs, ask them to transfer your child to a school that has the services - they can do this, in some cases the school will also provide transportation.

If all of you at the staffing agree on the program for your child, an individualized educational plan (IEP) will be developed. The IEP includes an outline of the material your child is expected to learn over the school year, the kinds of behavior the school will be expecting from his/her, the extent to which your child will participate in the regular program, and the criteria that will be used in evaluating your child's progress. The IEP will also list the teacher(s) who are responsible for teaching your child.

No more than 60 school days can elapse between the time your child was referred for special education evaluation and the conference date. If you agree to the proposed placement, your child may be placed in the program as soon as possible or no later than the beginning of the next school semester.

If you do not agree with the decision reached at the staffing, you have the right to request another meeting with the school. Write to the district superintendent (d.s.), stating your reasons for this request. You should also ask for the opportunity to study your child's school records. The d.s. will notify you when a meeting date has been set, and he/she will probably conduct this meeting.

If you continue to object to the schools' placement decision on your child, you have the right to request a formal impartial due process hearing. An impartial due process hearing is held when you and the school cannot agree on a placement for your child. In making the request for a hearing, state the reasons for the request, your child's full name, birthdate and school. You should also ask for an opportunity to study all records on your child. Clearly state that you are requesting a formal hearing and not another staffing so that the d.s. will not schedule another staffing. Send a copy of your letter to Dr. Hannon. The d.s. will send your request to the Illinois Office of Education who will arrange to have an impartial hearing officer conduct this meeting. At this hearing, the hearing officer will seek to establish whether: your child has needs which require special education intervention, he/she has been appropriately evaluated; the proposed placement is directly related to your child's needs; your child's rights have been fully observed.

Bring any supportive material you have on your child to the hearing, it also helps to bring professionals who have worked with your child to help you make a more forceful argument.

Your child's educational placement will not be changed until after the completion of the staffing and/or the hearing unless he/she is a danger to himself or others. Our office has copies of the State Rules and Regulations on Special Education which we will be glad to send you to help you through this placement process.

Even if you agree with all placement discussions, as a parent of a special education student the school must hold a conference with you each year to discuss your child's progress. Each year the school must also re-evaluate your child's progress and a new IEP must be developed with your cooperation.

If you have any questions about the rights discussed in this pamphlet, contact the CHICAGO PUBLIC EDUCATION PROJECT (CPEP).

CPEP is a non-profit private program affiliated with the American Friends Service Committee. CPEP is supported by private contributions, foundation grants and government contracts.

CPEP staff help parents and students enforce their rights in the Chicago Public School System by offering advocacy services, workshops and training.

CPEP staff can be reached by writing to:

407 S. Dearborn St.
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or calling 427-2533